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## ‘A teacher but not like in school...’: telling stories to reflect on space, identity and pedagogy

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### Abstract

This paper reflects on ethnographic research at Educational Video Center (EVC), a non-profit media education centre in New York City. In this paper I provide an analysis of EVC as a third space (Bhabha 1994) and detail some of the processes involved in Documentary Workshop, one of its core programs, in order to discuss how meaning is made through a complex series of pedagogical processes. I go on to explore EVC as a site of learning and consider ways that the pedagogical processes of work with young people and digital video production might be adopted in school and initial Teacher Education today.

**Keywords:** Digital technology, Educational Video Centre, Ethnography, Informal education, Teacher identity, Third space.

### Introduction: Educational Video Centre

*Watching myself on that screen, I know how much I learnt and all of the experiences I [had] with everyone. EVC is special, like we have really said something...*

(Documentary Workshop participant)

In this paper I reflect on ethnographic research that took place at Educational Video Center (EVC), a non-profit media education centre in New York City (NYC). Located in Midtown Manhattan, EVC has a mission ‘dedicated to the creative and community-based use of video and multi-media as tools for social change’ (EVC mission). Founded by Steve Goodman in 1984, EVC has grown from a single video class into an educational centre with an international reputation offering young people,

who travel from public schools located throughout the five boroughs of NYC, the opportunity to critically reflect on the world around them through the lens of a digital video camera and to meet and work with young people from other schools and neighbourhoods in the city. Documentary Workshop is described by EVC as its ‘signature program’ (EVC Curriculum Guide, 2005), and is divided into two, offering a beginners’ and an advanced course each semester:

*The high school Documentary Workshop annually serves 60 public high school students. Students attend the workshop at EVC’s facilities in Manhattan, four afternoons per week for 20 weeks, earning school credit for their work, learning to research, shoot, and edit documentaries...*

(Goodman 2003: 19)

The programme sits alongside Youth Organizers Television (YO-TV), Professional Development and Community Engagement as vehicles for helping young people develop literacy, critical thinking and civic engagement skills (EVC Curriculum, 2006). Members of doc workshop, as the programme is commonly referred to, learn how to make a documentary using a digital video camera and edit their work using Final Cut Pro. Physically located within an alternative high school, EVC employs professional media artists and certified NYC high school teachers to work with students ‘who may not have previously experienced academic success’ (EVC staff member) and ‘produce documentaries that explore a social or cultural issue of direct relevance to them’ (Goodman 2003: 19).

The research project had a dual focus: conceptualising EVC as a third space (Bhabha 1994) between formal and informal education, I was interested in how young people attending the Documentary Workshop, one of the core

programmes offered by EVC (Goodman 2003), engaged with new digital technologies (the creative and educational potential of these forms and how technology was adopted to frame a narrative of transformation) and the use of digital technology in ethnography. The research was concerned with the intersections of ethnography, education and digital technology. Travelling to NYC I had a number of questions about ethnography, the role that digital technology plays in teaching and learning and in research practice.

Today there remains much discussion about the role of research in education and the contribution that research practice makes to teacher education (BERA 2014). In this paper I share my analysis of EVC as a third space (Bhabha 1994) and reflect on the stories of the research in response to the call from Mayer (2014) for a sharing of research for teacher education.

### **Telling stories**

Stories have a long history as a research method (Connelly & Clandinin 1990), and are important in an educational context because they bring together multiple perspectives of an experience and offer a range of voices (Dyson and Genishi 1994). Stories shape how we think about the world (Guinier & Torres 2002), and their use helps establish a research dialogue (Laurillard 1993). I use the term story as a way of bringing together context, information, knowledge and emotion, which Norman (1993) describes as the crucial elements of communication. I began this paper with a quotation from the first Documentary Workshop screening I attended, because it represents an important point in my story of this research. At that screening I did not know how important EVC would become to my research practice or how influential it would be in shaping my thinking about education and about young people learning and using digital video production processes. At that first screening I had not yet negotiated a role at EVC or discussed the possibility of ethnographic research. As an audience member I felt privileged to view the work that had been produced, and as someone who has worked with young people in formal and informal education, in schools and video production programmes, I simply wanted to find out more. Listening to young people reflect on the process of documentary production I had

already read *Teaching youth media: a critical guide to literacy, video production and social change* (Goodman 2003), I knew the aims of the EVC curriculum and understood in theory their goal of ‘critical literacy’ (p. 3). At that screening what I wanted to know more about was the experiences and views of the young people this curriculum targeted. I wanted to know why young people attended EVC and whether the experience of EVC was important in their educational ecology. I was interested in what young people had to say about their lives, in what way and why EVC was described as special; what did the word mean? I also wanted to find out what young people thought of the documentary production process and whether it had value (educational, social and emotional value) for them. Goodman (2003) claims that ‘progressive pedagogical strategies’ (p. 18), are integrated into Documentary Workshop. However, in the classroom what does this mean and how did EVC manage student-centred learning? In the digital age (Tapscott 1998), how important was the technical skill development and practical processes of those who took part and, perhaps more importantly, what did the young people who attended Documentary Workshop learn about digital video production and about themselves?

To answer these and other research questions and to investigate how digital technology might be used in educational ethnographic research I set out a framework that brought together three parts of a story. The first part of that story was focused on understanding how meaning is made through a complex series of pedagogical processes between youth producer and adult teacher (EVC staff), text (the documentaries produced as part of the EVC curriculum and the methodological digital video production process), and the technology used and the audience who view the work. The second part of the story investigated how young people who took part in Documentary Workshop engaged with new digital technologies, the creative and educational potential of these forms and how technology was adopted to frame a narrative of transformation. In the research through words, images and digital video, recorded as part of the research process and the EVC curriculum, I explored how young people represented themselves and their experiences of digital video production in a third space (Bhabha 1994). The third and final part of the

story addresses being a digital video ethnographer in a community of enquiry. To tell the story of the research I chose to adapt a broadly ethnographic methodology using digital video to record observations and interviews. At the start of the research process I travelled to NYC to investigate the 'social world' (Hammersley & Atkinson 1983: 16) of EVC. As a participant observer my aim was to 'experience and observe the group's norms, values, conflicts and pressures' (Hargreaves 1967: 193) and through my participation in Documentary Workshop and the relationships I developed, like Whyte (1955) 'I learned answers to questions that I would not even have the sense to ask' (p. 303).

### The research context

This research has its origins in a number of interconnected debates: the pedagogical location and role of practical production generally and digital video production specifically, its conceptual nature along with our understanding of literacy (sometimes referred to as new literacy, media literacy or digital literacy) and young people's use of media production in educational (defined at its broadest) contexts. There are, of course, many definitions of literacy (Buckingham 2003). From a somewhat limited definition covering the ability to read and write (Cambridge Assessment 2013), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) expands this to include 'the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning to enable an individual to achieve his or her goals, to develop his or her knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in the wider society' (UNESCO 2013). While the purpose of this paper is not to explore the many competing and sometimes contradictory definitions of literacy nor comment on the impact of digital technology (cf. Kress 2003), in this research I draw on Gee's (2000) assertion that literacy is 'inextricably connected to "identity work"' (Gee 2000: 412) and, like others (eg Scribner & Cole 1981; Heath 1983; Street 1984; Barton et al 2000), view literacy as a social practice.

Although formal education has historically rejected media production practices, and production-focused courses are still rare (Buckingham et al

2000), media educators have long argued for the inclusion of media production within the curriculum (cf. Buckingham 2003). While Buckingham et al (2000) argue that young people learn 'more from reworking forms with which they have greater familiarity and a personal engagement' (p. 151), it is in the United States of America that there is a long history of youth media and after-school programmes and where youth-produced media is valued as a form of self-expression (cf. Chavez and Soep 2005; Hobbs 2011; Goodman 2012).

### Learning spaces

The research was conceived as a study focusing on the value and impact of digital video production in formal and informal education settings. From this broad base the research questions evolved to focus specifically on digital video production in a location that might traditionally be referred to as informal and its role and significance within ethnographic educational research.

Like Weis & Fine (2000), I recognise that 'learning takes place in varying spaces' (p. xi) and I originally used the term formal to describe locations offering activities within the school curriculum and those that are subject to external demands (eg curriculum guidelines and syllabus requirements). Informal education was defined more broadly to include activities that occur within the physical location of the school but outside the formal curriculum, such as after-school projects and special events, which may or may not happen on a regular basis. In addition to these examples, informal was used to describe community arts projects and experiences which young people voluntarily take part in and may or may not have to pay for. Of course the boundaries between formal and informal are blurred by organisational practice. Many informal community arts projects and groups offer some formal accreditation (although not necessarily the same as that offered within a formal curriculum) and there are examples of digital video production work timetabled within the curriculum but aimed at fulfilling non-curriculum aims (cf. Sefton-Green (2004) who considers how technology is used outside of school).

This distinction between formal and informal, school and other, is identified by EVC staff members when they talk about their work, and by young people

who describe EVC as ‘very different from school, like I thought it would be kind-of similar but Ivana is a teacher but not like in school...’ (Documentary Workshop participant). In an article focusing on how learning media literacy and video production nurtures ‘idealism, intellectual development, and commitment to social justice’, Steve Goodman identifies the challenge of defining where EVC fits in an educational framework:

We’re not quite an afterschool program because kids are served during the school day and they get school credit for their work. Are we a technical program, a jobs program, an arts program, a literacy program, a social change program? Should we become a school ourselves? Goodman 2001: 7)

While Heath & McLaughlin (1993) suggest that effective youth organisations do not define themselves in relation to school, the dialogue around the naming and defining of what happens at EVC is important because it is a dialogue that facilitates reflection, embraces change and goes to the heart of the EVC mission. Freire (1970) believed that ‘education must begin with the solution of the teacher–student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students’ (p. 53, Freire’s emphasis). At EVC, freedom from a formal imposed curriculum and Freire’s concept of dialogue provides the foundation for a re-imagining of the teacher–student relationship in a new or third space.

### **Conceptualising EVC as a third space**

Third space theory (sometimes referred to as hybrid theory) has been used in a variety of different disciplines to explore the space ‘in-between’ (Bhabha 1994: 1) two or more discourses and to move beyond the binary categories of first and second spaces and literacies (Soja 1996). Moje et al (2004: 43–5) offer three views of third space, firstly as a way to build bridges from knowledges and Discourses ‘often marginalised in schools settings’, secondly as a navigational space where students can cross into different discourse communities in order to succeed and finally as a space of ‘cultural, social and epistemological change in which the competing knowledges and Discourses of different spaces are brought into

“conversation” to challenge and reshape both academic content literacy practices and the knowledges and discourse of youths’ everyday lives’ (Moje et al 2004: 43–4).

In this research the third space is conceptualised as an epistemological position between the binaries of formal and informal education, self and other, teacher and student, and as a geographical metaphor; a site of praxis where theory and practice meet. The third space is used literally to describe a place that is not a site of formal (school), or informal (not school), education and a site of:

... invention and transformational encounters, a dynamic in-between space that is imbued with the traces, relays, ambivalence, ambiguities and contradictions, with the feelings and practices of both sites, to fashion something different, unexpected. (Bhabha 1994: 1)

Like Gee (1999), I distinguish between ‘Big D’ and ‘little d’ using Discourses as ‘language plus ‘other stuff’ (p. 17). This research then acknowledges that young people engage with different Discourses in different contexts (Gee 2000; Moje et al 2004). EVC is considered a hybrid, third space where young people make sense of their world through the acknowledgement and collaboration of multiple funds of knowledge (Moll et al 1989, 1992), Discourses (Gee 1996, 1999), and through the production of digital video texts. At EVC, pedagogical practice acts as a bridge between formal and informal educational processes, the written and the visual, student and teacher.

### **A community of practice**

Pedagogy... refers not solely to teaching methods and curricular content and design but also to the processes by which teachers, students, administrators, staff, and others negotiate and produce knowledge, identities and social relations.

### **(Hesford, 1999: xxviii)**

At EVC the common goals and shared belief systems (of knowledge and accepted behaviour and customs), what Fine (1979: 734) calls the *idioculture*, helps create a strong group identity which keeps many young people involved in EVC programmes and the staff group cohesive and

committed to their roles. The fortnightly staff study group facilitates a shared discourse which creates a community of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991), and new members of staff move from novice to expert, what Lave & Wenger (1991) call legitimate peripheral participation to full participation (pp. 36–7) with the support and guidance of experienced members of staff who share their knowledge and experience. Shared meanings are important because group members use them ‘to interpret experience’ (Spradley 1980: 6), and to develop their identity as a member of the EVC community.

As new members of staff move from novice to expert and often from one role to another more challenging position, so too do young people who participate in more than one EVC programme. At EVC young people from three programmes (beginners and advanced Documentary Workshop, and YO-TV) support each other in the production process and share their experiences of EVC. At a YO-TV rough cut screening, YO-TV interns answered questions about the production decisions they had made (‘why did you choose to film that interview on the bus?’ and ‘why is the screen so dark in the first interview?’), and what they thought the effect of their documentary would be on an audience (‘what do you think people will do after seeing your documentary?’). Such questions encourage young people to reflect on their work and contribute to the shared mission. Responding to the question ‘what do you think people will do after seeing your documentary?’ Rebecca (YO-TV intern) reaffirmed her view that ‘media is a tool for social change’, adding ‘I know that’s a cliché but it’s also true’, before going on to talk about the direct action she hoped the documentary would inspire. After the screening, Ivana, one of the co-directors of Documentary Workshop, noted that ‘they [YO-TV interns] basically said all the things I wanted to say but couldn’t because they have to come to it themselves and I can’t ask and answer those questions’.

Young people who take part in a Documentary Workshop internship choose and make decisions about their documentary topic as part of a process of critical thinking (Goodman 2003), and in recognition of an anthropological notion of culture (Freire 1973); that what young people bring, their knowledge and culture, is of great value in the learning process. EVC sees the learner-

centred approach, with students’ questions and concerns driving forward the process of teaching and learning, as central to their philosophy. Critical teachers offer students choice (Shor 1992), changing power relations in the classroom and a reduction in ‘the need for students to resist learning’ (p. 56).

## Conclusion

In this paper I have shared my conception of EVC as a third space (Bhabha 1994); a space between the binaries of formal and informal education, self and other, teacher and student. In this research the third space is both a geographical metaphor and a site of praxis where theory and practice meet. Goodman (1994) considers media education practices and video production as ‘transgressing the boundaries that separate school from community, artist from audience, thought from practice’ (p. 47). In this research I was able to transgress my own boundaries between researcher and participant, teacher and student and through the use of digital video create a new ethnographic practice and new ethnographic texts (White 2009).

At EVC I saw how important a shared vision (Senge 1990), and a critical pedagogical practice, was (cf. Freire 1970; Illich 1971; Giroux 1988; McLaren 1989). Indeed throughout this research EVC staff members shared their commitment to critical education with me, and talked about the pleasure of their educational experiences. I understood how a community of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991) was developed through a shared discourse and a family structure that offered friendship, emotional support and a sense of security. The experience of EVC offers a resource for young people who are marginalised or excluded from education and society. Through digital video production practices, young people ‘imagine alternatives [and] new worlds’ (hooks 1990: 341). Young people said that EVC was special. Through my research practice I understood that special-ness as a result of a complex series of pedagogical processes between youth producer and adult teacher, text and technology.

Looking back I wonder how that specialness might be adapted in our schools and Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes. While many consider the experience of ITE as a third space



(eg Lewis (2012) who explores how the creation of a third space reduces the gap between theory and practice, and Burch & Jackson (2013) who consider how the philosophy of third space activity might develop partnership), perhaps it is the temporality of ITE – the state of provisional identity and transitional status – that should be celebrated as a space of influence (Green 2005). At a time when the 'in-between space' (Bhabha 1994: 1) is used to devalue and undermine ITE, we must position betweenness, 'a preposition of prime importance' (Serres & Latour 1995: 64), to reject the binary oppositions offered in current educational policy and the structures that demand 'obsessive fatal attraction' (Giroux 2005: 15).

- i. The idioculture is 'a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviours and customs peculiar to an interacting group to which members refer and employ as the basis of further interaction' (Fine 1979: 734).
- ii. The rough-cut screening (sometimes referred to as the first assembly or director's cut) is the preliminary version of a film text. It includes only basic editing, the order of shots and scenes into sequence and does not include the full detail of the final text.

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